



The Order of Making

Oliver Jackson



BY BRUCE NIXON

Opposite: *Chair People No. 6*, 1980.
Mixed media, 46.25 x 20.25 x 25.5 in.
This page: *Chair People No. 10*, 1985.
Mixed media, 33.25 x 16.25 x 37.4 in.

As a sculptor, Oliver Jackson is almost free of what we typically call "style." His work frustrates attempts to establish an overall order based on appearance alone. In many instances, his production begins from a specific mode of resistance, and as these change, so does the work. That, at least, is characteristic. He might, for example, undertake a series based on the formal concept of a head mounted atop a column. It is an art historical cliché, but the familiarity of the motif poses resistance because the concept will not sustain the work, thus forcing the artist toward extremes of imagination and invention as he builds. Jackson does not allow himself to repeat solutions. That, too, is characteristic. How many pieces will he make before his invention flattens out and the original idea no longer engages him? This particular series of untitled works, approximately 10 pieces constructed in 1990 and 1991, incorporated a tremendous array of materials and formal solutions.

But resistance might be found in a stack of marble sheets, some the length of a standing person, but none more than an inch thick—broken cast-offs at the quarry after large blocks have been trimmed to size. How many figural pieces can he build from this trim before he arrives at a point of repetition or, once again, the concept goes flat? Trips to Carrara in 1983 and 1985 led to a figural series in which Jackson shaped the sheets into roughly human forms, incised the surfaces, inked the incisions, and then applied simple, evocative materials: a rusty ring, twine, rusty wire, rope, and hanks of faded, colored



cloth. For all the simplicity of the initial idea and the apparent roughness of form, these pieces exercised immense presence, yet they could still be elegant, even delicate at times, or vigorous in their associations. Jackson responds in immediate, concrete ways to the specificity of materials, yet it would be misleading to suggest that he is oriented primarily toward them. He takes materials up as he finds them, as they suggest ideas, or as he needs them.

In order to illuminate Jackson's sculptural procedures, we might turn to an idea formulated by the French medievalist Étienne Gilson: art is not a kind of knowledge or a way of knowing; it belongs, instead, to an order other than that of knowledge, which is the order of making. What is not directly relevant to the *making* of a work is about art, but it is not art itself.*

Though such ideas are not current in art theory, they continue to provide spacious room for contemplation. For our purposes, they can be distilled to an essential conception of the artist as maker. Nothing else overcomes this fact, and it is absolutely crucial to any understanding of Jackson's work. Familiarity with his work leads to a point where we intuitively feel the sensibility of the maker come forth as the force that brought the materials to form, something more than "imagination" or "invention" alone. It is a quality of mind, manifested through the materials, whatever they happen to be. We learn the artist through his making.

Jackson, it goes without saying, is much concerned with problems of essence and being, the movement of form from the absence that precedes the idea into possibility and then to completion, problems that open themselves to a concrete, yet deeply personal investigation through the process of making: making, that is, as experience. In this realm, no material possesses an intrinsic "art" meaning prior to the maker's use of it. All simply make themselves available.

From Gilson once again: "There is art only when the operation, essentially and

in its very substance, does not consist of knowing...but of making. Although it requires knowledge and action, man's ability to make derives directly from his act of being. Man as capable of making is first a making being, because his activity as a craftsman is like an outer manifestation of his act of existing." What Gilson calls the "outer manifestation" is that form which makes the sculpture accessible. Access, then, is our ability to recognize the inner image of the work, which is the sensibility of the maker, received as sculptural form but inseparable from the making of it.

Oliver Jackson was born in 1935 in St. Louis. During the late 1960s, he became involved with the Black Artist Group (BAG) in St. Louis, an intriguing aspect of his early artistic maturity. He participated in a number of collective projects involving theater, dance, and music, and he worked with BAG musicians, including his close friend Julius Hemphill. To say that this experience invested his work with an "improvisational" or jazz-like component would be, once again, misleading. The quality of relationship is not that simplistic. Still, it is difficult to imagine that the experience of collective, interdisciplinary production did not affect his thinking about the varieties of making and how different modes of art achieve form. BAG ensembles were characterized by the absence of a complete rhythm section, and one sees in Jackson's work analogous ideas related to the innate qualities of available materials: self-imposed restrictions, an instinct for working against traditions that govern how things "should" be together, and the ability of artists to create and authenticate their own standards. In 1971, he took a teaching position in the San Francisco Bay Area, and in the intervening years, he has become associated with the scene in Oakland, where he is a familiar presence.

The problem, always, is how to make something that has not been made. It is in series that Jackson shows a vivid and expansive making consciousness. An early, fairly straightforward example is a set of some 10 assemblage pieces called the "Chair People," built between 1978 and 1986. A chair is a design product, and its function is always apparent. It is figural to the extent

Top: *Untitled No. 4*, 1983. Marble and mixed media, 44 x 18.75 x 22.5 in. Bottom: *Untitled No. 3*, 1983. Marble and mixed media, 76.5 x 31.5 x 12 in.



that it evokes a seated position, one of the basic human postures. Consequently, the sources of resistance are several. First, its formal scaffolding—continuous, readily apparent, referentially utilitarian. Then, its challenge as an externally imposed form, not one of the artist's devising. Sitting is a posture of rest or, in an urban context, of the waiting enforced by social bureaucracies on the needy. It is also a posture of authority, of kings on their thrones.

Jackson worked with the stripped-down metal frames, although he reinforced the figural element by placing a "head" on the upper back. The works are characterized, again, by an intense material specificity, each being radically different from the others, each establishing an internal or inner image based on the capacity of material to generate a unity harmonious with the frame. From this unity, we feel the work's effect. *Chair People No. 1* (1978) is loosely fetishistic: a black, skull-like mask sprouts a dense cluster of objects, including a small skull. The frame is encrusted in black, and

repeating orange dot motifs mark the "shoulders" or "arms" of the figure; it has a "spine" and nestles two other small skulls like infants.

The "fetish" motif is extended in *Chair People No. 3* (1979) and *Chair People No. 6* (1980), both wrapped in cloth, the latter being thick and textured, almost muscle-bound, yet with the springy softness of cushions. *No. 6* incorporates the yellow vinyl of the original back, whose tacking is echoed with an arch of emblems across the "chest"; a kind of crown rests on the head. *Chair People No. 3* is tightly wrapped in brightly colored cloth, while the head is a flat, golden mask facing directly upward. A fetishism is sustained in *Chair People No. 9* (1980), an all white female form. Its tiny head seems encased in a helmet; the chest and torso extrude clusters of jagged, spiky projections, like a hedgehog's quills. *Chair People No. 10* (1986), in a much different mood, is austere. Part of the frame is missing, the chair drops backward, and the head, a rectangle of rusted metal, has

an ambiguous "expression." Otherwise there is only a tangle of rusted wire, a rusty can, an old bell, all of which infer a particular kind of poverty. The can hangs like a monk's begging bowl.

From the first, a term as loaded as "fetish" is corruptive, because it assumes the artist's intentionality preliminary to making, or a deliberate effort to determine reception. Yet how do we escape associations? How do we remain "in" experience, allowing the work to work, and not evoke the easy, familiar associations of a reflexive, solely cultural nature? We must step back to reconsider everything.

In the "Chair People" series—and this also applies to the presentation heads and the sheet marble figures—the "fixed" armature is ultimately the source of variety. The pieces succeed both individually and as members of a series because Jackson's con-



Untitled Sculpture, 1999. Wood, steel, enamel, cloth, and mixed media, 99 x 45.4 x 47 in.

than life, packed to high density with the materials and tools of an artist—spent paint tubes, ratty brushes, cans, rags, and a wide, flat face like the pan of a shovel. The whole form is covered, or visually unified, by a blackish, viscous, tar-like paint. In its physical correspondences, it suggests that the artist's visceral substance is materials and tools: that the artist is what takes place in the studio. The dark surface quality generates other inferences.

One head, *Untitled* (1991), is assembled from pieces of cast aluminum and mounted on an antique music stand with an old-fashioned, three-footed base: a severe work, yet exuberant. The aluminum "feels" light. But how do you keep a pole from being a pole? One thinks of Picasso's bull, the combined bicycle seat and handlebars. Material transformation is always more vital than, say, a straightforward carving of the same thing. It enables us to know the sculpture in, or through, the specificity of its making. Wood from a tree limb is carved and polished to evoke the standing figure of *Wood Figure No. 3* (1992). Periodic rings of transparent white imply parts of its anatomy, and at the same time, slow down the movement of the eye. It is a slender thing, graceful, with a wooden block for a head. The form leans. (A related piece was done with a bronze block head.) It exerts its harmony through the figure, as do the series: excitement lies in the transformation by which material simplicity leads to strong form and the possibility of powerful evocation.

Jackson is also interested in stacked works. In some instances, these can be relatively straightforward: *Marble Sculpture* (1998) is composed of a steel pedestal, a stone base, and at the top (held upright by a wedge of lead), a rough block of gray marble with an elegant calla lily carved on one side, the stone rubbed in places with pigments. (Though his sculpture is oriented toward assemblage, Jackson is a skillful carver in stone and wood.)

Other sculptures are more complex. To take one freestanding work (*Untitled*, 2006), starting from the bottom: a small mount holds a heavy wood base several

sistency as a maker leads toward both an individual and a collective formal harmony. At the same time, all the series are interconnected as humanesque but intensely static forms. Jackson works their kinesthetic potential from their stasis. The formal vehicle—the chair and the marble figures are excellent examples—has properties that enable the artist to leave significant elements of gesture incomplete because he knows the viewer's bodily response to the individual work will complete them.

The work says more than it speaks. Its effects may be so precise that the viewer has virtually no choice but to respond. As frames, the chairs (or the mounted heads, what might be called "presentation" heads, or the marble silhouettes) constitute a

fixed, immobile pose. Though they are "alive" in their stasis, they remain contained. At times, they seem almost to tremble with tension. The viewer's physical engagement is, finally, a search for gateways into the inner image of the work, an image that will extend all the way to the internal harmony of the series itself.

If series demonstrate the range of Jackson's instincts—his sense that formal restriction leads to a limitless material freedom—individual works are more inclined to demonstrate the concentration of his imagination. These works, too, can be readily characterized by their wide range of forms and materials. An assemblage figure (*Untitled*, 1978–84) stands with its back hard against the wall, a bit larger

inches from the floor, creating both a shallow opening and a rim of shadow; the wood base itself, thick as a railroad tie, is white except for the ends, left raw to expose the rings in the wood. In the very center of the base is a circle of sheet lead hammered into the surface to make a bowl, which contains water and a block of broken red glass resembling a heart. Letters are punched into the lead. Then come two thick wooden shafts, one on each side of the bowl, which support a large, rectangular marble block in which Jackson has carved a partial figure in one side, a lower body, clearly male, knees folded into the belly, as if under great duress; and on top of the marble, another large whitewashed block, raw at the ends. A circle is inscribed at top-center of this block, with blue pigment pressed into a long, vertical crack.

Untitled stands about waist high, yet it unequivocally exerts its verticality, emphasized formally by a pattern of shifting hue and tone at each level. And still the eye goes first to the figure. Here, Jackson has drawn on Michelangelo's concept of working from relationships of mass to mass rather than of mass to space, a formal situation that leads to effects of tremendous tension and struggle, insofar as a sequence of horizontal components is seen as a vertical form impressing its verticality on surrounding space. The figure, too, presses upward toward verticality. But you have to get down on your knees to see the bowl and heart, the dark, cool water in this cave-like space, which feels as if it is under great weight: such dynamic relationships are crucial to the experience of the work.

Another, formally related piece, *Untitled II* (1985; reworked 2002), is a kind of bier. A heavy pedestal of rusty steel in the shape of a horizontally stretched U supports a long, horizontal block of white marble. A partial figure is carved into the top—a lower torso, loosely sketched thighs and groin, the legs and feet twisted in an unmistakable posture of death. It is a naturalistic form surrounded first by patterns of cuts in the long "bowl" in which it lies and then by the natural surface of the stone. The head is a large obsidian block, its carved (weeping) faced turned away, on a square of red cloth. If the obsidian

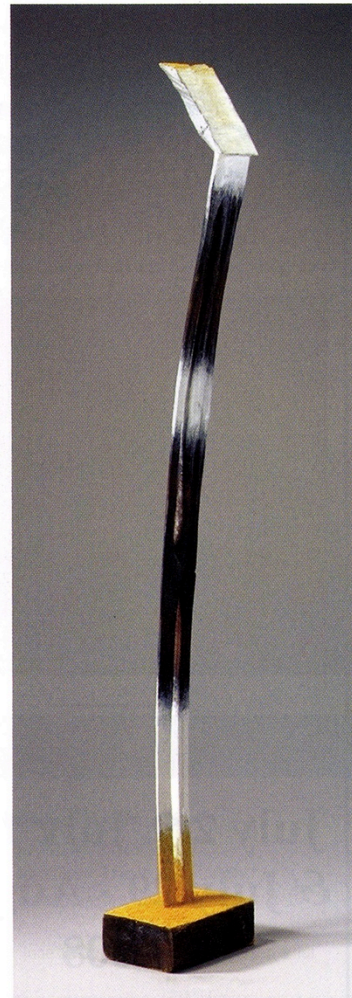
Wood Figure No. 3, 1991. Wood and mixed media, 19 x 91 x 14 in.

and cloth are removed, a face of hammered lead is revealed below, with tiny gilt tears by one eye; remove that, and a smaller, less detailed mask of hammered lead lies below on another cloth; remove them, and in this deep, hollow bowl in the marble, a highly realistic, carved skull rises from the stone. Each level suggests a state of being. Each functions sculpturally with equal satisfaction.

Though they resist summarization, these two stacked works, the latter especially, are concerned with passages and transformations. In the latter, the passage through the levels of the face/head becomes a ritualistic, mysterious, experientially memorable experiential act. Numbers are inscribed at each end of the block, corresponding to the dates of Jackson's father's life. A code is inscribed at the head of the block: FARTHE L OVIEVE—which can be translated, or intuited, in several ways.

To know these things is, however, sculpturally unimportant. Perhaps their relation to the artist is best ignored. On the other hand, we can see that while they are not rationally connected, they operate effectively together. But this fact does not rationalize the work. It becomes evident, rather, that various intriguing elements of the sculpture are not dependent on the sculpture, and their removal would not alter the work sculpturally. Yet they contribute a great deal to its effect, its atmosphere.

All this just begins to account for a large and complex body of work. Its sheer physicality tends to arouse description rather than interpretation. Description inaugurates one kind of engagement with the materials and their interactions, exciting the imagination to play and dream among them. While interpretation is another kind of engagement, it tends to remain outside, or separate from, the work in itself. Jackson, an indefatigable student of art in all its periods and forms, has come to understand the ways in which effect challenges the mechanisms of otherwise reflexive cognitive procedures. While his sculpture is not solely an art of effect, whatever else we make of it will probably start there.



Jackson is not a metaphysical artist, nor does he proceed from any informing premise beyond that of making. Because the instincts in the work move so unerringly toward direct experience, habitual interpretive positions or heavily determined ideologies may soon become entangled outside the work, a condition that only the imagination can overcome.

Note

*Quotations come from Étienne Gilson's *The Art of Beauty* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965).

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